

Missional Discipleship:

what is it?

mis·sion·al
[mish-uh nəl]



disciple[ship]

noun

Intentionally following 'The Way' of Jesus Christ.
Responding actively to the call to 'be my disciples'.

Produced by the Mission & Discipleship Committee
of the North Western Synod of the United Reformed Church

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a **Missional Discipleship** resource, helping local churches in

Walking
the Way
Living the life of Jesus today

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Chapter ONE

Christianity in today's society no longer looks like Jesus

This is the conclusion of a piece of research conducted among American Millennials (the generation aged 20-30), who tend to be actively hostile towards the Christian Church. Among young people of good will and social conscience, many of whom are actively interested in holding some sort of faith, the Christian Church is seen as *Bad News*. And the primary reason is the yawning gap between Jesus and the institution that bears his name.

The Christian Church in the west is in crisis. That is both alarming and encouraging. It is encouraging because it means that there is not likely to be something uniquely dysfunctional or wrong with any particular local church that is struggling. But it's alarming because it means that there isn't any ready-made answer or "quick fix" to the problem. Furthermore, it means we all have to own the problem as "ours": we must not imagine that it is some other church's own unique problem and that "we're okay".



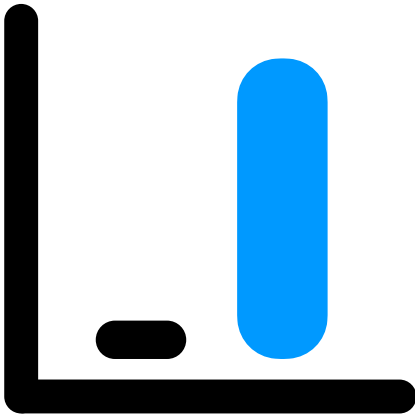
People outside the church recognise more clearly than we do the gap between their experience of us as church and what they imagine or expect of Jesus. And they are far less forgiving than we are. So when I talk of “the Church”, I mean “us”, and when I talk about “us”, I mean “the Church”.

The scale of the crisis becomes apparent when we look at some recent statistics:

- ▶ The number of Christians born in the UK between 2001 and 2011 fell by 5.3 million - about 10,000 per week. At this rate, the number of UK-born Christians would reduce to zero by 2067 (UK Census).
- ▶ Anglicanism is declining faster than any other major denomination. If the current rate of decline continues, it will disappear from Britain by 2033 (British Social Attitudes Survey).
- ▶ Church attendance (as opposed to membership) has declined steeply from 11.8% of the population in 1980 to 5% in 2015.
- ▶ The number of United Reformed Church members in 2015 had declined to just 27% of its 1980 level (from 188,000 to 52,000).
- ▶ Millennials (aged 20-30) are the generation most disconnected from church. A poll of 16-29 year old Americans in 2007 by the Barna Group revealed that only 16% had a positive attitude towards church. Overwhelmingly, church was viewed as:
 - ▷ Judgemental (87%)
 - ▷ Hypocritical (85%)
 - ▷ Old-fashioned (78%)
 - ▷ Too involved in [right wing] politics (75%)
 - ▷ Anti-gay (91%)

What we are seeing is a rapidly accelerating disconnection from institutional Christianity, coupled with widespread and growing active hostility towards the Church. It is happening across all the mainstream denominations. This cannot be explained as a contemporary apathy towards faith, a general decline in moral standards or a lack of interest in spirituality. The problem is that people perceive and experience the Christian Church as Bad News.





The response to Jesus is very different. Research published in December 2013 found that, according to Wikipedia, Jesus Christ tops the list of the world's 10 most significant people in human history, followed by Napoleon and Shakespeare. That is a staggering finding, primarily because Wikipedia is probably the most representative single deposit of global knowledge and opinion available to us.

The point is not whether everyone ought to agree with the conclusions of the research: what we need to take urgent notice of is the enormous gap between contemporary attitudes to Jesus (which are overwhelmingly positive) and contemporary attitudes to the Church which bears his name (which are overwhelmingly negative).

The Barna researchers, for example, noted a sharp distinction: when talking about Jesus, people would smile, talk animatedly and positively; when the topic moved to the Church, the mood would change abruptly, and the participants and comments would become negative and hostile, with comments like "They [Christians] should be taken out behind the shed and shot!" Their conclusion is hugely significant: "Christianity in today's society no longer looks like Jesus".

This is the nub of the crisis facing the Christian Church: we do not behave in the same way, share the same priorities and make the same sorts of differences to people and communities as Jesus did. People do not recognise us as followers of Jesus.

We need to be clear: people in society are hungry for Jesus-shaped churches and church-goers! Encounters with those sorts of churches and people are significant. People gossip excitedly about them. At the same time, they are often clear that they're talking about what they experience as an exception to the rule. We need desperately to change that rule!

Were Jesus to come and live among us again, doing the sorts of things he did and changing the world in the ways he did, he would receive a tremendous welcome, as he did in the Galilee. People don't dislike the Church because they are tired of Jesus: they dislike the Church because we lay claim to his name but don't look or act like Jesus. We've forgotten that the plural of "disciple" is "Church"! We're talking the talk, but not walking the walk. And people have spotted it.



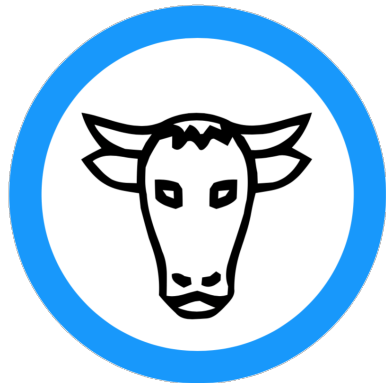
Missional Discipleship takes as its starting point that the Christian Church needs to look recognisably like Jesus and to make the same sort of differences to the lives of people and communities. It is a process of reconnecting the Church with the Jesus we claim to follow. It is active engagement in a process of discipleship - closely following him day by day until we remind people of Jesus. It is about growing Jesus-shaped churches that are part of the Good News we live by and proclaim.



- ▶ *In what ways does the picture of the crisis faced by the Christian Church ring bells for you?*
- ▶ *In what ways do you recognise the view of the Church held by the Millennials in the Barna research?*
- ▶ *Which bits of your church do you personally experience as Jesus-shaped?*

Chapter TWO

Discipleship and faith in the gospels:
a road trip with Jesus

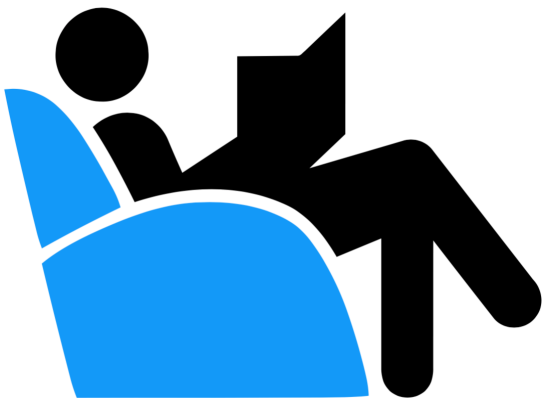


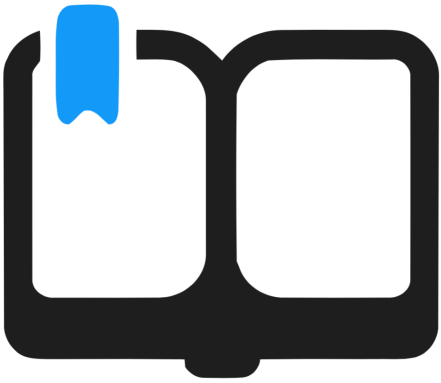
The four New Testament stories we have of Jesus - our gospels - were written to call the readers to follow Jesus. In Mark's gospel, our oldest gospel, the very first words that we overhear Jesus speaking are "Follow me" (Mark 1:17). Everything about Jesus - his mission, his teaching, his significance - unfolds within the framework of the journey that Jesus is about to undertake. All four gospel writers choose to tell the story of Jesus as a road trip.

Sometimes, though, we're so busy paying attention to Jesus that we fail to recognise that the gospel writers are telling us a story of what it means to be the Christian Church. We need to pay careful attention to the disciples - not just as "fall guys" that are used to emphasise a point (eg about how terrified they are in the boat when the storm blows up on the lake), but about what it means to make that road trip - to try and follow Jesus closely.

As readers, we eavesdrop on conversations between Jesus and his disciples and between the disciples themselves that take place “on the road”. The central character is, of course, Jesus, but we watch the story unfold through the disciples’ eyes, and hear it through their ears. It is a road trip told from the perspective of the people whom Jesus invites to share the journey with him: the disciples.

This is really important. It means that the disciples themselves play a vital role in the story. They are not only the witnesses to Jesus and the storytellers, but important characters in the story themselves. Jesus’ story is their story - and vice-versa. Because it is all about following Jesus, the question of how closely and faithfully the disciples follow is a vital part of the stories the gospel writers want to tell us.





This is because the gospels were not written to provide the Christian Church with a history of Jesus' life and mission, but to summon the readers to join the community of Jesus-followers (the church). The stories of Jesus' disciples are meant to shape the lives of the church and its members. "Really knowing the stories inside-out" is not about knowing what happened when, but about becoming faithful followers ourselves.

- ▶ If Matthew had devised a test to see how much of his gospel we had absorbed, he'd want to know how faithfully we were following Jesus ourselves, and how obedient we were being to Jesus' teachings.
- ▶ John would want to know how real and transforming our experience of God's life for us in Jesus through the Holy Spirit is - how abundant it is.
- ▶ Luke would want to find out how central compassion and forgiveness is to all our relationships - individually and as a community of Jesus-followers - and the extent to which we put the most marginalised first, as Jesus did.
- ▶ Mark would want to know how faithfully and courageously we stand up to the most powerful forces that were trying to shut down every attempt to make our world more like the Kingdom Jesus proclaimed.

Christians were first known as “followers of The Way” (Acts 9:2/11:26). It was only later at Antioch that they came to be called “Christians”. Being called by Jesus to become a disciple is what summoned the first members of the church into relationship with Jesus. Following Jesus - being disciples - is what makes all Christians down the ages part of the Church.

Christian faith, according to the gospel writers, is best understood as following. That entails commitment and trust. It certainly isn't about a series of intellectual positions that we hold on a number of different subjects!

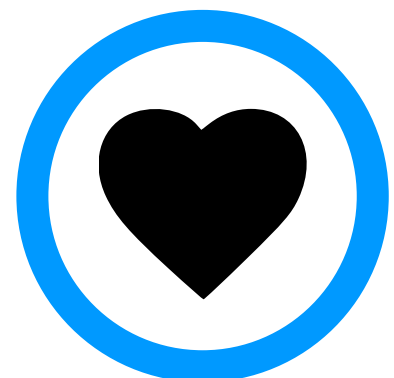
Faith requires the sort of wholehearted commitment that Jesus demanded of James and John when he called them to leave their family and livelihood and follow him (Mark 1: 19-20). It is expressed in the sort of trust exhibited by the bleeding woman (this time in sharp contrast to that of the disciples!) who says, “If I can only touch his clothes, I will be made well!” (Mark 5:28) and the faithfulness of the women who, alone of all his followers, stick with Jesus all the way to the cross, whatever trouble it will bring down on them.

The journey that Jesus is undertaking when he calls the disciples to follow is his mission. His Good News is that God is in the process of transforming this world into the Kingdom of God. This means that the way in which the world works is being undone: God is creating a world of life and flourishing that benefits the poor and marginalised first. That is very Good News to the poor people and the religious outcasts of his day. As Jesus moves among them in the Galilee at the outset of his ministry, he is welcomed with enormous enthusiasm and excitement. As he turns towards Jerusalem, however, his journey is bringing him closer and closer to the religious and political leaders whose power comes from being in charge of the way things are. His message of a world being transformed is not going to play well here. It is going to provoke a confrontation that he knows he will lose. This is what makes Jesus' call to follow so challenging and uncompromising: are you prepared to follow wherever this journey with Jesus will lead, even to the cross? That is what discipleship means. There is no easier, less costly way, but it is the road to Life (Mark 8: 34-35).



The gospels are written for the Christian Church to incorporate us into the living story of Jesus and the people he called to follow him. They are not pieces of history to tell us where we have come from, so much as sermons with an altar call! We are invited to see within the story of the disciples all our own responses to the call of Jesus, the invitation to be part of his mission and what that might mean for us if we are serious about following wherever that journey might lead. That is what Christian faith means. We read the gospels to understand our own situation and learn what following Jesus faithfully means today.

Missional Discipleship recognises that the Church is a community of disciples who follow Jesus and are engaged in his mission of transforming the world into the Kingdom of God. It is a process of deepening our discipleship and engaging more faithfully in mission: becoming more recognisably like Jesus and making a Jesus-shaped difference in the lives of people and communities.



For over two centuries, biblical scholarship has read the gospels primarily as historical sources for the life and teaching of Jesus.

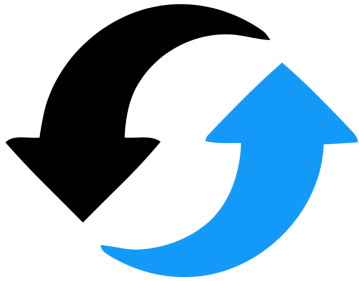


Make a space of 2-3 hours to read Mark's gospel through at a single sitting.

- ▶ *Try actively to hear it as though you were listening to Mark preach, hearing him call you to follow Jesus yourself.*
- ▶ *Ask yourself, "What is Jesus calling or challenging me to do? What is he calling or challenging my church to do?"*
- ▶ *How does that change the experience of reading the gospel for you? What did you hear you and your church being called to do?*

Chapter THREE

Missional Discipleship:
dying and rising

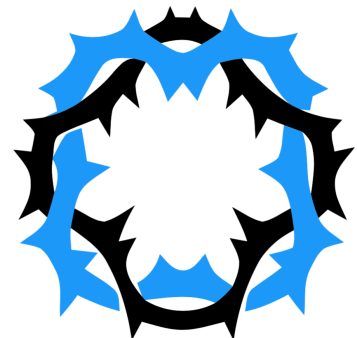


There are two call narratives in the gospels. The first comes at the outset of Jesus' ministry when he calls Peter, James and John from their nets to follow him, saying "Follow me and I will send you out to fish for people" (Matthew 4:19). Half way through the story, they reach Caesarea Philippi. This is where he breaks the news to the disciples that following him will entail the journey to Jerusalem, suffering and death. He calls them a second time to follow him nonetheless, telling them that they will need to "deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow" (Matthew 16:24). And then he says something both shocking and profound:

*"For whoever wants to save their life will lose it,
but whoever loses their life for me will find it"*

(Matthew 16:25)

Jesus challenges them this second time to follow him with their eyes wide open to how costly that will be. He calls them to walk the Way of the Cross with him. What does he mean?



He means first of all that he is asking his closest friends to be with him during his most difficult and terrifying time. He knows that there is no way that he can avoid the cross without compromising his mission. There are no deals that he can make with Rome or the Jewish religious leaders to avoid death on a Roman cross. Compromise and deal-making are exactly what the disciples want him to do, but Jesus knows that this is one of those Martin Luther moments when he has to say, "Here I am. I can do no other - so help me God!" To do anything less is to betray the Kingdom of God.

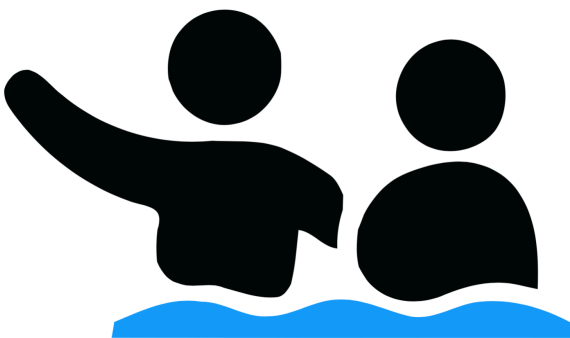
This is Easter for Jesus. Proclaiming and living by the standards of the Kingdom means that he is inevitably going to be killed when he gets to Jerusalem. Good Friday - the cross - is the direct result of what Jesus believed and preached and lived.

Easter Sunday transforms Good Friday from the death of all hope into the gateway to a new world - what St Paul calls, "the New Creation in Christ" (2 Corinthians 5:17). God doesn't just raise Jesus from the dead, but also draws a line under everything that previously had the power to frustrate and destroy God's intentions for our world - for life, love, forgiveness and flourishing. Jesus' death and resurrection becomes the means by which God brings a new creation out of the ashes of the old.



Dying and rising. That is what happens to Jesus at Easter, and what needs to happen to us and to our world so that we and it can become all God intends us to be. There is no way to the New Life that God has for us other than by everything “old” dying, and by God raising up something new. Easter is not just the climax of Jesus’ own story, but the pattern of salvation for us and for our world. It happens because, by God’s grace, we do not have to die ourselves: instead, through the Holy Spirit, we share in Jesus’ own death and resurrection.

This is what baptism is all about. Paul describes baptism as both a vivid picture of dying and rising, and as the sacrament of being united to Christ through being baptised into his death and resurrection. Imagine the scene at the Jordan where John is baptising people by dunking them under the water and lifting them out again while you read these words:



“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his!”

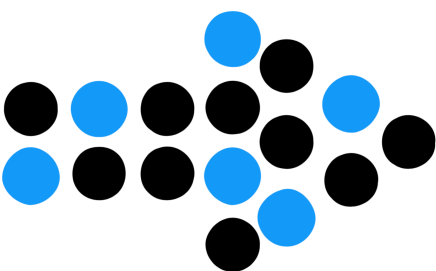
(Romans 6:3-6)

This process of dying and rising is not just a once-and-for-all event that happens to us at baptism: it is also the pattern for the whole of Christian life. The process of becoming more and more like Jesus is portrayed as a lifelong process of dying to the “old” ways of living and rising to the “new life in Christ”.

Discipleship is about learning to live by this pattern of dying and rising. It isn't easy, yet it is the only way to discover the life God has for us in Jesus. That is why learning and developing habits of dying and rising are at the heart of spiritual discipline. It is the most important thing for disciples to learn: it is the secret to becoming and living like Jesus. It is the key to effective and faithful mission. It is where Jesus calls us to follow. It is the Way.

The Church will not be renewed to look like Jesus until it recognises that it is addicted to survival. Survivalism is the greatest temptation for a church under pressure, and is the direct opposite of the process of the Way of the Cross. The salvation of Easter would not have been possible had Jesus prioritised his own survival. A church in survival mode makes decisions based on prolonging its life. It asks, “How can we use our resources to extend our life as long as possible?” rather than, “How can we use our resources most effectively to make a Jesus-shaped difference to the lives of our people and communities?”

Churches that are walking the Way of the Cross are liberated to focus on making the world more like the Kingdom of God, because they are prepared to sacrifice themselves if necessary in order to do so. Churches in survival mode are paralysed from making the courageous, costly and risky decisions that following Jesus calls for, because their priority is their own life. They cut themselves off from the abundant life that God has for us in Jesus through the Holy Spirit because they have not learned the truth that the way to find one’s life is to lose it for the sake of the Kingdom.



Missional Discipleship is a process of spiritual growth and discipline that focuses intentionally on helping individual disciples and churches to discover what needs to die in order to be liberated for the new life that God intends. It is about developing a pattern of life centred on dying and rising - a sustained engagement with walking the Way of the Cross.



- ▶ *In what ways do you recognise survivalism in your own life and church?*
- ▶ *In what ways do you find it helpful to think of Christian life as a process of dying and rising?*
- ▶ *In what ways do you find the Way of the Cross most exciting and challenging?*

Chapter FOUR

Missional Discipleship: a life lived not for our own sake



God's mission in Jesus was to transform the world into the Kingdom of God. Jesus taught us to pray daily, "Your Kingdom come; your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10). To pray the Lord's Prayer is self-involving: it is to pray, "Change the world, O God - and start with me/us! Use us to make the world more like the Kingdom."

Very particularly, the Kingdom is Good News first and foremost to the very poorest (those who do not have enough bread for the next 24 hours) and for the marginalised, excluded and oppressed people. The purpose of the Church is to share in God's mission. We pray for the coming of the Kingdom and at the same time work to be the answer to our own prayers and to those of others who long for the transformation the Kingdom will bring to their lives. As we do, we will ourselves be and become more and more a sign of the Kingdom: a foretaste of what the world will look like when it is transformed into the Kingdom of God. We will be part of the Good News we proclaim - a little bit of "heaven on earth", as Jesus was.

“Missional” thus re-affirms the conviction that discipleship is a commitment to life-in-mission. It is a life lived for and on behalf of the world that God loves and is saving in Jesus, rather than a life lived for our own sake.

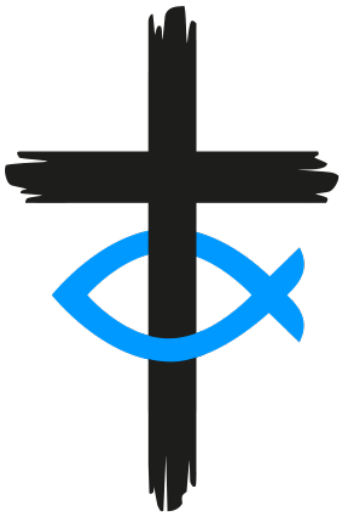
Life-in-mission is Spirit-life. We cannot do these things in our own strength, any more than Jesus could. That strength comes from the Holy Spirit, who gives gifts to all the different members of churches. Mission can only be effective when members discover their Spirit-given gifts and put them at the disposal of the church. This is what is meant by “the ministry of all believers”.

As Jesus was empowered for his ministry and mission by the Holy Spirit at his baptism, so our communal life in worship and celebration of the sacraments (baptism and Communion) ought to be a constant and vital source of renewal, refreshment and resourcing by the Holy Spirit for mission.

“Missional” is confessional: it is a deliberate acknowledgement and reminder that it is possible to live according to other priorities and goals, and in so doing, be faithless to our calling to follow Jesus on the Way of the Cross.



Most importantly, it signals a recognition that the Church can be part of that from which the world needs saving. It owns the reality that the Christian Church has been responsible for writing some of the most godless chapters in human history. It proclaims that individuals and churches are most clearly renewed by the Holy Spirit and most faithfully followers of Jesus when they are making a Jesus-shaped difference in the world and are recognisably part of the Good News of Jesus Christ.



Missional Discipleship is a process of discovering renewal, refreshment and resourcing through the Holy Spirit, in order to engage more effectively and faithfully in mission. It involves the entire church membership in discovering their gifts and putting these at the disposal of the local church - each one playing their part in Christian ministry. It is a renewed commitment to mission - a life lived for the sake of the world rather than the Church. It is the embodiment of the United Reformed Church's vision of itself to be ...

**“God’s people, transformed by the gospel,
making a difference for Christ’s sake”**

Catch the Vision

Chapter FIVE

Missional Discipleship: “Church 101”

Missional Discipleship is a response to the crisis that the Church no longer looks like Jesus. Instead, it is often very Bad News indeed - part of that from which the world needs saving, rather than a foretaste of the Kingdom of God. Missional Discipleship is a process of re-connecting the Church to Jesus: of walking the walk.

Discipleship is the key image in the gospels for faith and Christian life. Faith is about commitment, trust and action, rather than a set of doctrines and intellectual propositions. Missional Discipleship is a process of reading the gospels in order to hear afresh Jesus’ call to follow individually and as churches, and of understanding our own Christian life as an active conversation with the first followers of Jesus.

The greatest challenge is to live by the pattern of dying and rising (the Way of the Cross), and the most destructive temptation is to survivalism. Missional Discipleship is the process of learning the spiritual secret to Christian life: learning to die to ourselves in order to discover the freedom of the life that God has for us in Jesus.

101

► 101

- (a) *number often used to denote an introductory course, or,*
- (b) *slang usage, to mean founding principles, or essential starting point.*

e.g. ‘The founding principles of the early church were Discipleship and Mission.’

Missional Discipleship is about rediscovering ministry and mission in the power of the Holy Spirit. It is a process of renewal, refreshment and resourcing for mission that is sustained by each member playing their part in Spirit-enabled ministry, creating mission communities of disciples that are making a Jesus-shaped difference in their communities.

If it sounds like, “But I thought this was only what churches were meant to be, anyway”, then that is exactly right. Missional Discipleship is about churches being what they are meant to be - recognisably like Jesus - rather than something different. For this reason, it’s a process rather than a programme. It’s a process of engagement with the key areas of Christian life and faith: what will emerge will be different for everyone as the people and contexts vary in different churches. I find it helpful to think of it as “Church 101”.



There are four main areas of initial exploration, which are detailed overleaf:

1. Renewing covenant:

Covenant is what shapes relationships and makes the church the church. It is different from contract - the way in which we set up our relationships within a consumer culture.

In our consumerist culture, contract forms the basis of all our relationships. It sets out what we owe one another, what we can demand and expect of one another, and what the limits of duty and care are.

For all the talk of covenant, churches often operate on a contract model - not just in terms of complying with good practice and legislation, but in our relationships within the church. "If you don't do what I want, I'm leaving!" is classic "contract" behaviour. It is a mindset that is anti-covenant, hugely destructive, and sadly, all too common. Contract is based on calculation, limitation and enforcement; covenant is about grace, generosity, compassion and commitment.

Our first step along the road will be to explore and renew covenant as the heart of all our relationships and commitments.



- ▶ *In what ways does the contrast between covenant and contract ring bells for you in terms of discipleship and mission?*
- ▶ *In what ways does your church operate obviously in "covenant mode", and in what ways on a "contract" model?*
- ▶ *In what ways are you most a "covenant member" of your church, and in what ways least so?*
- ▶ *Would the other members of your church agree?*

2. Learning to trust:

Do not be anxious about your life ... (Matthew 6:25)

If Jesus had a 'spiritual secret', it was his trust in God. Yet the moment we try to take Jesus absolutely seriously, we realise how much of our church life is characterised by anxiety. So many of our decisions are driven by fear of the future - about how we will have enough to survive. This is equally true of our personal lives.

Prudence, culture and experience all teach us that trusting others is dangerous. Without a vibrant awareness and experience of a church life lived in covenant relationship, even our conciliar decision-making (government by Church Meeting, Synod and General Assembly) can become a system of limiting and controlling people rather than sharing with them the adventure of discerning God's will.

Trust is fundamental if we are to journey together. We will engage in a series of trust-building measures: trust in God, in one another, in change, and trust that "this will work".



- ▶ *In what ways do you find it easiest to live trustingly, and in what ways most difficult?*
- ▶ *Think of the most recent important decisions you have made*
 - (a) *individually*
 - and*
 - (b) *as a church.*
- ▶ *Where was faith-as-trust most evident, and where was it most difficult?*

3. Investing in change:

Change is very uncomfortable. It is also scary. Our level of fear is usually directly proportional to the level of control we feel we have: the more unfamiliar the territory is, the more unpredictable the outcome feels, and the higher our fear and resistance rises with the level of perceived risk.

That is why it is always easy to find reasons not to change. Yet change is at the heart of discipleship. Discipleship is a call to step out into the unknown, choosing to trust in Jesus rather than let our fears have the final say. We need to learn how to leave the comfort of the familiar for the vitality of the new life to which God is calling us.

The hardest and most important lesson is that we are safest with Jesus and where he is calling us to be - and that isn't "safe" in the conventional sense. We will explore how to welcome and embrace change.



- ▶ *What are the three changes you would like to see in (a) your own life and (b) your church that would excite and inspire you?*
- ▶ *What would be the three changes you would resist most fiercely if someone else suggested them?*
- ▶ *Can you imagine a change that God might be calling you or your church to make that might transform things, even though it is terrifying to contemplate?*

4. We are God's answer:

We assume that the people we need to solve our problems are the people who aren't in the room. We assume we're the problem - not the solution. Yet the Holy Spirit equips churches for discipleship and mission by giving gifts to everyone, which the Spirit intends to be put to use within the church so that the church - individually and collectively - can become more recognisably like Jesus and and more obviously a part of the Good News it proclaims.

That means we all have a responsibility to discover our gifts and exercise them for the benefit of everyone. It's called "ministry".

We will engage in the prayerful, intentional process of identifying all the gifts that the Spirit has given us. We will discover that we are God's answer for our church. We will discover just how rich we are in Spirit-gifts and resources, and how to live joyfully out of God's abundance, rather than the scarcity which terrifies and paralyses us at present.



- ▶ *In what ways is it surprising to think: "We are God's answer for our church"?*
- ▶ *What gifts from the Holy Spirit do you already know you have?*
- ▶ *To what use are you putting them? In what ways do you think of that as "ministry"?*

How ready are **you** to start the journey?

Space:
for your thoughts and reflections

You can explore further:

- ▶ check out the short videos with further commentary on each of the sections
- ▶ download a podcast version of the booklet
- ▶ download an eBook version
- ▶ engage in the forum discussion

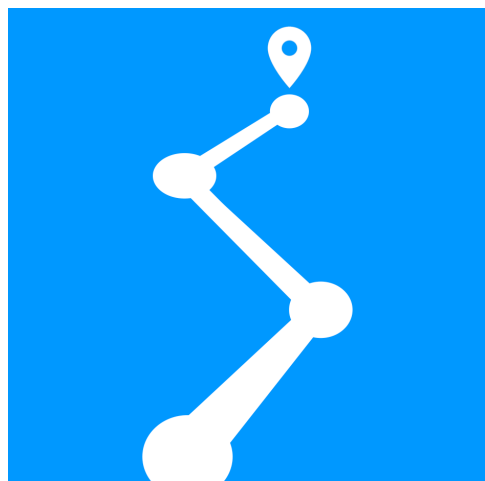
Go to
walkingthewalk.org.uk
and follow the Missional Discipleship open course links.

Space:
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Discipleship



a **Missional Discipleship** resource, helping local churches in **Walking the Way**
Living the life of Jesus today